

# Valley of Vision

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

In the darkest nights of the soul God upholds his people with His powerful grace.

LTS: James 1:1-12

I realize that for some of you this message may be an unexpected departure from our study of Romans. But when I considered how my recent illness may effect the church body, I decided that the best way I can shepherd the church, my family and my own soul, would be to offer a message on how Christians should think about and respond to personal suffering.

To get us there I want to spend a few minutes expositing 2 Cor. 12:1-10.

So please take your bible and stand with me for the reading of this powerful text of Scripture.

Read 2 Cor. 12:1-10

*I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.*

*<sup>2</sup> I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows.*

*<sup>3</sup> And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—*

*<sup>4</sup> and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. <sup>5</sup> On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses—*

*<sup>6</sup> though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.*

*So, to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.*

*<sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup> But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”*

*Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*

<sup>10</sup> For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

You may be seated.

In my briefcase I often carry a small book that has occasionally been for me a wonderful help, especial in times of trouble when I don't know what to do or how to pray. It's actually a compilation of several puritan prayers. Among reform-minded Christians it is a very well-known volume and it is called

The Valley of Vision.

I think it is called the Valley of Vision because as these dear saints suffered in various ways, they learned that the valley of suffering offers the clearest and brightest view of the glory of Christ.

Now, there is far more that could be said from this text than what I am going to say today, but in the interest of time I will limit my thoughts to five points.

The question I want to answer this morning is, what truths should we believe and embrace when we find ourselves in the valley of suffering?

First of all, when we find ourselves in the valley of suffering, we should remember that...

## I. God leads all Christians through the valley:

1. . In verses 1-6 we read about this extraordinary man by the name of Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles. We don't have time to work through the context of Paul's comments here, so suffice it to say that in Paul's complicated relationship with the church in Corinth, he found it necessary to defend the legitimacy of his apostleship. But he didn't want to do it. Unlike the false apostles who had infiltrated the church, Paul didn't want anyone thinking more highly of him than they ought.
2. So, to defend the legitimacy of his apostleship Paul boasted in things that his opponents found reprehensible. He boasted in the number of times he had been beaten, shipwrecked, lashed, stoned. He declared that everywhere he traveled, rather than being welcomed with open arms like the "super apostles who were destroying the church," Paul was usually rejected and always in danger. One time he even had to be let down in a basket to escape from those who were in pursuit to kill. Him. He says (11:30) "If I have to boast, I will boast about my weaknesses.

3. But then in chap 12 he switches over to the visions he had seen. But the way he presents it causes one to wonder if Paul was speaking of himself or someone else? He said, “I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago – whether in the body or out of the body, I don’t know – God knows. Such a man was caught up into the third heaven (i.e. where God resides).
4. S. Lewis Johnson comments that its striking to note that “Paul speaks of going to the third heaven in the third person.”
5. According to the biblical record, Paul had several personal encounters with the risen Christ. But here, Paul speaks specifically of that occasion 14 years previous when he was taken up to the 3<sup>rd</sup> heaven, saw things no one has ever seen, and heard things that he could never repeat.
6. Behold a man of monumental spiritual privilege and favor with God. And yet, Paul suffered. We might think of such a man as one whom God would protect and preserve from the normal struggles of life, but no! In fact, by his own testimony he suffered more than most.
7. My friends, if you have never truly suffered in this life, don’t let yourself feel cheated. It’s coming! If God’s choice apostle suffered, you and I will also experience suffering. The inference of this passage is that God leads all Christians through the valley of suffering. As Job said  

“Man was born from trouble as surely as sparks fly upward.”
8. The apostle Peter says it like this: (1 Pet . 4:12 *“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”*)
9. Suffering is common to man. And It’s the normal experience of the Christian life. If the venerable apostle Paul was led by God into the valley of suffering, you too will be led there. You can count on it the causes of suffering are many and mysterious:<sup>1</sup>
  - a. Sometimes suffering is the result of sin
  - b. Sometimes God ordains it to keep us from sin
  - c. Suffering occurs simply due to age
  - d. Those who preach health and wealth tell us that all suffering is always due to sin. But that wasn’t true of Job. God had a plan for Job’s suffering that he probably never fully understood.
  - e. To be sure, we hardly ever know the exact reason God leads us into a specific valley of suffering. And in those moments, days, or years, that we suffer, we are called simply to trust that his gracious providence is working everything for good. So the first truth we should remember in the valley of suffering is that God leads all Christians through the valley. Second:

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<sup>1</sup> S. Lewis Johnson, audio message.

## II. God has a Purpose for the Valley:

1. Look at verse 7. Paul writes,

*to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.*

2. God's providence is always purposeful. I think it's safe to say that anyone who has had a genuine revelation of the risen Christ and is caught up into the 3<sup>rd</sup> heaven is going to be tempted to become arrogant and proud. Why did he receive this thorn? In short, God wanted him humble. That kind of privilege would tempt even the best of men to develop a superior attitude; to think of Himself higher than he ought to think.
3. One commentator imagined what it might look like if Paul, Timothy and Barnabas disagreed about where to send the next church plant. Paul says, We should go north. Timothy and Barnabas disagree and say, We think we should go south. But Paul retorts, "Which of us has been to the 3<sup>rd</sup> heaven?"<sup>2</sup>
4. God always wants his servant humble. Not indecisive. Not timid, but joyfully submissive to the will of God. That's what it means to be humble. So, the Lord gave him a thorn.
  - a. By the way, the word for thorn does not suggest the pointy things you find on our TX mesquite trees. Rather, "Thorn" refers to a long wooden stick with a sharp point on the end that one might use in battle.
  - b. This might imply that sometimes the kind of suffering God appoints for us can be excruciating!
  - c. The thorn God gave Paul was intended to produce a humble dependence on the Lord in the life of one who is arguably the most significant personality in the building of the N.T. church after Jesus Himself.
5. As a point of application, whenever you find yourself in the valley of suffering, it's always appropriate to assume that one of God's primary purposes is to humble you. So, God escorted him into the valley of suffering. He gave him a thorn, a messenger of Satan to torment (flog or scourge) him to keep him from exalting myself. Paul knew that he was not above the sin of pride. He would most certainly be tempted as anyone in his position would.
6. What was that thorn? Well, the fact of the matter is, nobody knows! Some have speculated that it was:
  - a. A pain in the ear or head
  - b. Hyminaeus and Alexander
  - c. Epilepsy
  - d. Seizures
  - e. A problem with his eyes

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<sup>2</sup> Paraphrased from John MacArthur, audio sermon on 2 Cor. 12:10

- f. Malaria
  - g. Depression
  - h. Luther thought it was a tendency to despair.
  - i. Someone has even suggested it was baldness.
7. The fact that we don't know what the thorn was is grace to us. God, it seems, has sovereignly arranged it that way. And I think it's safe to say that He didn't make it specific because he wanted to leave it wide open so you can apply the various troubles that you experience in the valley.
  8. How do you know whether God's thorn is humbling you as designed? Well, you will know God's humbling influence is working when you find in your heart an irresistible need to pray. And that is exactly what Paul does in his valley of suffering, He prays! And what did he pray for? Look at the text (v. 8). He says, "*Concerning this I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might leave me!*"
  9. The reason I say that prayer is a sign of humility is that true prayer from the heart is always a tacit confession of one's need. It's an admission that you are not sufficient in yourself to address and resolve your need!
  10. And notice How Paul prayed. We read (v. 8) "Concerning this I pleaded with the Lord three times (or on 3 occasions) that it might leave me. Paul didn't want this suffering. To the contrary, he wanted out!
  11. This is instructive for us, beloved. When you are in the valley of suffering it is NOT a sign of immaturity or unbelief to cry out to God to remove the thorn. If you question whether that's right, you need only think of Jesus, who in the garden of Gethsemane fell on His face and cried out, Matt 26:39, *My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.* "What was Jesus saying? He was saying, God, I don't want to go down this road. Rescue me from the valley of the shadow of death.
  12. In Heb. 5:7 we read, *In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death...*"
  13. My dear friends, hear me! It is normal, right and good to desire to be out from under your suffering. And that applies to all kinds of suffering.
    - a. It may be the loss of your job
    - b. The shock of giving birth to a precious child with special needs.
    - c. When the pain in your back turns out to be cancer
    - d. Your spouse or child suddenly dies
    - e. Your boyfriend breaks up with you
    - f. Your house burns to the ground
    - g. You become disabled
    - h. You're trapped in an awful marriage
  14. It's good to cry out for relief. And sometimes God answers that prayer just as you had hoped.

Example: My mother on her death bed. Almost died. We made funeral arrangements,

Two men came to hospital and prayed for her healing. I was convinced it was too late. But in answer to the prayers of God's people, God gave her back to us.

15. It is good to cry out to God when you suffer! It's good to lay your broken, dependent heart at the feet of Jesus. So, Take your fears and concerns to Him in prayer. Pour out your heart to Him! And then joyfully submit to His will remembering that His providence is always purposeful.
16. So we have learned that ...
  - a. **God leads all Christians into the valley.**
  - b. **God has a purpose for the valley.**
  - c. Now third (and this is liable to jolt you soul).

### III. God doesn't promise Relief in the Valley:

1. Paul's testimony (v. 8) was...,

*"I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might leave me. But He said to me, my grace is sufficient for you.*
2. Even though God is able to bring relief to our suffering, in the mystery of His good providence, he often withholds the relief we desire. Does that jolt your soul? Does that frighten you? It might help to remember that in the garden of Gethsemane Jesus received essentially the same answer that Paul received. Jesus cried out for relief and the Father said NO.
3. Listen! Jesus didn't triumph OVER the suffering. He triumphed through His suffering. And His Father was glorified BY his suffering. His Father did not rescue Him from the cross. The great triumph took place on the cross. Jesus obeyed the Father even though everything in his humanity cried out for deliverance! The prophet Isaiah actually said that the Father was pleased to crush Him.
4. This implies that In God's sovereign design for your life,
  - the cancer may end in death.
  - The husband may never repent
  - Your son may embrace a lifestyle that lands him in jail.
  - The injuries in that car wreck may never heal.
  - God doesn't promise relief from the valley of suffering. But he does promise the grace. And he supplies all the grace you need.
  - This brings us to Point 4

### IV. God does Promise Sufficient Grace in the Valley.

1. Verse 9 reads, “But He said to me, *‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*” “Weakness” (dependency on Christ) is God’s established vehicle for grace. But we need to understand grace properly if we are going to understand this important truth.
2. What is GRACE? Of course, your immediate response might be “Grace is “undeserved favor. Grace is the means by which the unrighteous are saved. It is the free gift of salvation to all who believe. And of course, that is NOT a wrong answer.
3. Paul himself wrote Eph. 2:8-9 “*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works so that no one can boast.*” Grace in that text points to the unmerited impulse in the heart of God to save sinners apart from law-keeping. When we are talking about salvation this definition of grace is absolutely correct. But in 2 Cor. 12, Paul has something else in mind.
4. In the passage before us, the grace that Paul alludes to us is the grace that comes when the pain of suffering won’t go away. It is the grace that sustains us when relief doesn’t come. This kind of grace is synonymous with the word “Power.” Jesus’s answer to Paul was, “My grace is sufficient for you for Power is made perfect in weakness.”
5. This kind of grace empowers you to kiss the rod in and give glory to God when it feels like your life is falling out from under you.
  - It is the unexpected desire and ability to sing through your tears your thankful adoration of the Shepherd of your soul.
  - It is one who shepherds you through the valley of the shadow of death
  - It’s power to take concurs fear and fills your heart with supernatural joy.
  - It is the kind of grace that welcomes any trial so long as it causes us to know Christ and fellowship with Him more than ever before.
6. It is the kind of power that enables you to say,
  - Bless you cancer!
  - Bless you broken marriage!
  - Bless you Covid 19!
  - Bless you diabetes!
  - Bless you lost job!
  - Bless you wife lost to death after 57 years!
  - Bless you heart attack! If it were not for you, I would never have known the overwhelming glory of Christ’s presence, His promises, His power, His comfort and His indescribable love.
7. When Jesus said to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you,” he meant, my grace is enough. And grace is enough because I am enough. I will never leave you or forsake you. I never have left you, but it took the valley of suffering to show you how near I have always

been. That's why its called...

### **The Valley of Vision.**

8. And this brings us to the last point.

#### **I. God leads every Christian through the valley**

#### **II God has a purpose for every valley**

#### **III. God doesn't promise Relief in the Valley**

#### **IV. But God does Promise Sufficient Grace in the Valley**

And finally...

### **V. God Contents your Heart with Joy in the Valley.**

1. Look at v. 9, "*Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest (or dwell) upon me.* That phrase at the end of verse 9 is noteworthy. S. Lewis Johnson points out that the phrase "That the Power of Christ may rest upon me," could be translated, "that the power of Christ may Tabernacle over me. It's a reflection on the O.T. when Moses would meet with God face to face in the tent of meeting. It's the picture of intimate fellowship between the closest of friends.
2. Paul was willing to endure any amount of suffering in the valley so long as it resulted in deeper fellowship with Christ. To the church in Philippi he wrote, "*that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his suffering..*"
3. And here in v. 10 he concludes...*For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*
4. You see, beloved. We know something the world can never know. We know the meaning of suffering. And if you are here today having thought that your hardships are meaningless, and bad luck, I have a better word for you.
5. Every time you suffer, it is wise to believe that God himself is humbling you so that you will come to the end of yourself and discover that the God who made you is ready to be reconciled with you if you will only believe and receive His grace through Christ Jesus, the Lord.

*In the darkest nights of the soul God upholds his people with His powerful grace.*